Chimes: New Visions

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Cover portrait by Bob Field
Adam Fieled in Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, 1990
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#7

Our house on Mill Road was a two-story wooden twin painted sky blue, placed on a curving block on the bottom of a steep hill, and was itself on an incline. The wide backyard, where was a large wooden shed also painted sky blue, and which fed onto a gravel path and then down another incline into Tookany Creek, was set sharply lower than the front door and then Mill Road beyond it, while across the street shone the side face of another hill, on which began the houses on Harrison Avenue. The effect of this portion of Mill Road was seclusion, intimacy, and rusticity— it looked very much like a nineteenth, rather than a twentieth century innovation. The moon above Mill Road was secluded along with us, coaxed into a space privatized by immersion in a world apart from the rest of Elkins Park, Cheltenham Township, Philadelphia, and the wider world. That emotion, of being apart from things, was blended into harmony or moodiness, exultation or melancholy, by the song of the creek and its currents. Though my block eventually intersected with Church Road, where there was more worldliness, traffic, and a general sense of movement, what echoed in me on Mill Road was a way of being alone, of being private. I had no siblings. No surprise that the house was haunted by strange ghosts, strange ghosts and echoes. I awoke once covered in spiders and they were dancing and I couldn't get them off. Also a big round white light came into my second floor window, it shone there and dazzled me and screamed and my Father told me it was a police searchlight and I believed him but he was wrong. I can see the light today and what it was doing was charging me and I was being prepared to serve in a kind of army and I am serving in a kind of army now: the light knew. I screamed out of pained recognition when I saw it and that was a spirit that haunted the house. Other echoes shone off the surface of Tookany Creek, which soothed but was itself of another world that was faraway and deep and that I couldn't reach even when I waded in it.

#15

O, for American summers of ice cream, basketballs, hot dogs, softball fields. On three special weekends a summer, day camp became sleepaway camp, before I had been to sleepaway camp. We sat on picnic tables on Friday afternoons, after the rest of the camp had departed, waiting for the fun to begin, and our sleeping bags had been deposited in the Rec Hall. It was in the air then for me, and on the sunny Saturday mornings that followed: a sense of absolute, boundless freedom. Looking out over the fields, the archery range, the equipment shed, and back up to the rock path at the foot of the Rec Hall's steps, the day glistened inside and around us, a feast of gracious gifts. If we could inveigle a counselor to supervise, we could use the swimming pool, maybe (if he or she were mellow enough) for hours. The pool itself was up and around the corner from the Big Top pavilion, where the other counselors fired up tunes on their boom-boxes and gossiped about the night before, less ecstatic than us to be here in Norristown. Many times, I claimed the equipment shed as a personal fiefdom, so as to organize massive, junior-professional softball games. Everything was trundled out to one of the two fields which was separated only by a wire fence from narrow, curvy Yost Road, and more empty fields on the other side of it, which I often stared at, entranced at a young age by nature spirits without being consciously aware of it. Counselors played with us, including CITs (Counselors-in-Training), and the context required us to cut heads— if you weren't good enough, you couldn't play. Later, down all the fields I ran, shirt tucked into shorts, playing capture the flag. Or, there I sat at the campfire, being told scary stories, feeling the magic of a small clan huddled, marshmallow soft (as the smores we cooked) in that realm: *camp*. Eventually I discovered sex, my sex, through the knowledge of a little girl who saw a big man in me. She held my hand and kissed me, and it was a deep wave of knowledge that left forever aftershocks rattling my walls with fire and thrill, frisson. Those lips were tender, were fevered, were forever cleaved to me in my imagination after that one night outside the Dining Hall, which was suddenly far away as Neptune. There was a brooding and a bittersweet and a knowledge of what can be achieved when two poles of being meet in the middle to kindle sparks. I held on to it.

#16

Suddenly there was a school that was a bigger school. There were lockers and a sense of importance; a combination to remember that was only mine. There were faces that were unfamiliar and a feeling that things were forming. I was always on the telephone because real dialogue happened on the telephone away from the presence of intercessors. I was always on the telephone because what was forming was a group that was not for everyone and I was in it. The group of us that was not everyone had rules that must not be spoken. What must be spoken was all the ways in which we were all moving forward. Moving forward meant being big and bigger and bigger, knowing more secret knowledge, occult practices of the teenagers we were trying to be. It did not mean the fullness that I still saw in Tookany Creek. Now, every day was regimented around who could talk to who, and how. The new school, more straightforward architecturally than Myers, had long narrow hallways with uncarpeted linoleum floors, and tended to be dimly lit. The journey from class to class was an adventure of seeing what new faces there were and discovering what they meant. My new friends would talk to me and not others. Alex, especially, formed myself and others around him as though we were a shell. Once the formation was established, as I was encouraged to dress how they dressed and say the things they would say, I understood that a kind of circuitry around us was closed. Tookany Creek ebbed and flowed, mutated, gurgled, or froze, given what the weather conditions were, but we were more hardened. In the parlance we used then: we were cool. Alex was tall, medium build, and imposing. He had been around Europe and Puerto Rico and was worldly. He knew how to be and stay cool. We talked on the phone every night. I was being cultivated. The clique was Alex's fiefdom. I had none. When I was over Alex's house, I picked up his white Fender Stratocaster and remembered all the records I used to listen to, how I'd wanted to play music. I wondered if I ever would. My problems with obeisance showed up again: I could not obey Alex, or the rest of the clique, the right way. I wanted to be more free. But it took time, the length of an entire year at Elkins Park Middle School, for this to be acknowledged and assimilated. For then, I held the axe, postured, and let an enormous question mark sail out of my consciousness and off into the air, before making my way down to the party in the unfinished basement, where Alex held court.

#20

We were moving. This was to be the end of Tookany Creek as an active presence in my life. I felt Mill Road move into a new space in my mind for things that no longer subsisted, like Bubba. The new house, like Mill Road, was on a street that curved, and unlike Mill Road was of red brick. The houses on the opposite side of the street, which varied architecturally, formed (as was later grateful) a wall so that you couldn't see it, but Cheltenham High School loomed behind them, a humongous parking lot flanked on a far side by the building itself. When the CHS marching band practiced in the lot that autumn, I heard them, boisterous and bumbling. It went with the smell of red and yellow leaves burning. I had no presentiment at that time what CHS would wind up meaning to me. I had a new room on the second floor overlooking the street, and one streetlamp which looked haunting at night. As with Mill Road, few cars passed. The house had a second floor porch we didn't use much, and a stone slab first floor porch where we would sometimes eat dinner when the weather was clement. Mom threw parties there too, sometimes for new neighbors. This was a neighborhood she would be a part of, even if there was (it turned out) no special place for me. The bathroom was a special shade of yellow, as was the basement where the washer and dryer were. I didn't like the new house at first because it was new, it didn't look like Mill Road and my room was painted aqua like toothpaste and had a funny smell. The night we moved in I gorged myself on sweets and lay awake in pain for hours, the same that had happened at Bubba's wake. Then I became adjusted and Old Farm Road had its own place in the hierarchy of places that were, or were to be, more or less numinous, lit up with the religion of music and harmony, in my head.

#21

For a long time there was no sound that was my sound. Then one night, I was at my father's house, which was not Old Farm Road. Glenside, this Glenside, was posh, luxuriant. On the radio I heard a sound that I knew instinctively was my sound. It was resonant, sharp, and had echo; it sent reverberations out to the four corners of the earth; it would not be denied. The music began with a short phrase, a riff, played on a hugely fuzzed electric guitar. The riff, allowed to reverberate and fill a large, studio-generated aural landscape, was a thunderbolt shot down from Olympus. It tugged, as baseball did, at everything in me which was masculine, courageous, outrageous even, daring. When a human voice was heard, filtered in, intoning a harsh reprieve to an errant muse (*You need coolin', baby I'm not foolin'*), it could be heard as vibrantly raw or merely shrill, singing in a very high register. My own consciousness perceived nothing but the vibrancy of power: extreme, uncompromising volatility and nerviness. The drums filled out an expansively drawn landscape with even more authority, as though a tribunal of Greek gods had converged and were sending secret messages to me in Glenside, ensconced with headphones while my father watched TV impassively across the room. When the guitar spoke for itself, above the fray and accented by space made for it, it was a form of blues made sophisticated beyond blues I was familiar with: all the agony and bravado of blues guitar pushed into a space where more eloquence was required, to achieve a necessary release past overwhelming tension. The cascades of notes were not just a release: they were a hint and a missive sent to me about the possibility of ecstasy on earth, achieved nirvana, release from karmic wheels. The aural landscape was rocky, mountainous, and allowed the listener to climb from peak to peak with it. In short, it was a place I'd never seen, a miraculous place, with landslides clanging over other landslides so that no stasis or silence need be tolerated. I had to merge with the landscape, join it, become it. I would not be able to sit still unless I became one with this sound, until I could similarly reverberate. I needed to reach the four corners, the mountain peaks, along with it. This sound that began with a loud guitar, played hotly, showed me the world seen through an auditory prism of light and shade.

#31

I liked the festive aspect of celebrations, and the little adventures one could set loose at a party: running wild, smashing things, drinking forbidden alcohol. Driven by a delirious continuance, I put my hands all over girls' bodies. I prodded, pinched, teased, respectful yet prolonging the experience any way I could. My will dovetailed with a wonted continuance and I was precocious: jacket off, tie loosened, a little wolf. I learned how to ride a high and how to direct cohesive energy into a palpable magnetic force. At a festivity on the top of a Center City skyscraper in April '89, on an immense rectangular outdoor porch bordered by chest-high railings, I looked down to see, a great distance beneath me, an empty street, what I would later know as Sansom Street. I was talking to a momentary companion about my philosophy of life as not a game of chance but a game of daring. "Look," I told her, "watch." I took a wineglass I'd stolen while the adults in the indoor festivity area adjacent were not watching, and heaved it over the railing. She rolled her eyes, but, as I could not help but notice, I got away with it. Wherever the glass had crashed, and the resultant shards, were invisible to my eyes. Nothing happened. I wouldn't be henceforth carted off to reform school. I had been daring, riding on my luck, and I succeeded. Just as, at a birthday party at the Greenwood Grille, I snuck another wineglass out of the restaurant into the tunnel connecting one side of the Jenkintown Septa station to the other, and smashed it down in some kind of compactor unit. But on the top of the skyscraper, looking out over the baroque, well-balanced Philly sky-line, a seed had been planted which I hadn't noticed. What the city was, in contrast to the suburbs, was as invisible to me as the rogue glass-shards then. I was destined to learn that a spirit of adventure was one thing in the 'burbs, but could be pushed out and developed much further in the city, where crowds of interesting people could always mean interesting action. As we turned back into the main festivity area to shake off the April evening chill, I had a calm sense of being in tune with the cosmos. I picked up a spare Kahlua, and drank it.

#32

My entire childhood, I enjoyed the stillness of houses in the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep. There was comfort there— everyone was still around— but also, as I discovered, a sense of freedom, invisible in the daytime. Consciousness became more fluid; perceptions widened; and all kinds of receptive sensitivity sharpened and honed themselves. The house in Mahopac where I had relatives was unassuming; yet I was sometimes able to tune in to a wavelength frequency there about oneness, states of unity, a sense of indissoluble bonds fastening together the perceptible world. One night, me and a bunch of other kids were asked to sleep in my cousin Camilla's wood-floored, white-paneled, rectangular bedroom. Camilla had a fish-tank I hadn't noticed much, set against the far wall, next to the raw, grained wooden door. I woke randomly in the middle of the night, while the rest of the house slept— set on a mattress with another girl-child I didn't know much, next to Camilla and her friend sprawled on the bed beneath a white comforter, elevated above us. At first, I was slightly irritated. But as I watched the fish swim around the tank, and listened to the mild hum the fish-tank made, I was not only mollified, I was entranced. The hum and the movement of the fish became a dynamo, a manifestation-in-motion of perfect peace, of a state of being completely covered by nourishing waters. I didn't sleep much the rest of the night. I was somehow able to rivet myself to paying rapt attention to a kind of symphony, being performed specially for me. The crescendo of the symphony transpired just as the dawn began to break. The stillness of the house ricocheted against the hum of the tank and the moving fish until I reached the apex of consciousness my young mind could reach. I was completely safe, yet completely free nonetheless. I dreaded the thought that anyone in the house would move. As had to be tolerated, the sun manifested, and feet began to shuffle in the hallway, breaking the magic spell. But Mahopac had an uncanny clarity for me of allowing moments like this to happen. I thought of these things, as I was riding in a train to Mahopac to visit my relatives. It was an endless classic day in the endless classic summer of '89. The train broke down and I was sequestered in it for hours, again slightly irritated at first. There was no one in my car; I took out my guitar and began to play. I had a sensation of Otherness from being in an unfamiliar place, a place strictly liminal. I learned for the first time, there and then, the magic of places that were not my home, were not destinations, and were in the middle of something. Though I couldn't feel the sunlight directly, there was warmth and a charm to the circumstances that I appreciated. It was the Mahopac wavelength frequency again. Travel could help me to channel; Otherness could rejuvenate one's interior world; mishaps could be gateways to other realities.

#37

I got a high from theater and from being onstage and I did many theater things in school. I was given starring roles because I was able to self-transcend and be other people effectively. Sometimes, in rehearsal, a mood would overtake me of complete giddiness, which was like being on a magic carpet. I was so completely beyond myself that I had ceased to be myself; a solid Otherness cohered in my consciousness. It was a way of flying and of being in an enriched world that had safety and surprise, stability and excitement, in it, simultaneously. I was Mortimer, in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, and there was a body in the window seat. What it meant to me to be someone else was that Mortimer was a gift to wear on top of myself, or a sword to bear of who I was which was more than just me. Every time I spoke as Mortimer, I made a choice and decided who he was: I composed. My dear ladies composed with me, and every coloration they made was made to resonate with my own colorations of inflection, movement, carriage, physiology. We would be fun to watch because who we were together, as an engine working with a script, forced us all to self-transcend and be a living, dynamic tapestry. Theater itself was an engine churning out archetypes, giving people swords to play with, gently or with great ferocity, and broadening the scope of human comprehension. When, during a performance, Martha forgot one of her lines, I crept out on a limb and improvised us out of the jam. Theater was a game to take that value: helpfulness and cooperation: and transcendentalize it into something not just a sine qua non, but the ultimate protective sword for groups of people, casts. That way, the giddiness and the magic carpets could continue ad infinitum, and safety and surprise comingle.

#44

Winter stars twinkled above another Recreation Center in Elkins Park. I had walked out of the party, dejected, deflated by too many ups and downs, social snafus. N had seen me making a blatant pass at someone else. Yet N and I were by no means officially an item. N was swinging on the swing set; I joined her. I wanted to commiserate with her at how superficial the whole thing was— people wearing masks, playing roles, no one being real with anyone else. I wanted to recalibrate my entire consciousness around N, and the state of sacred union, of oneness, we often achieved. I was unaware that N had seen the pass being made, not botched but only half-accepted. And, to her, a betrayal, of the sense of oneness we had together when we did our phone benders. N was always betrayed by the physical. So, she swung, under the eerie yellow-orange outside lights, weak against all the encroaching darkness, the parking lot and the stars. I noticed: she wasn't answering me the right way. I said, "Don't you think this party is…", and she cut in "no, I don't. I'm going back inside," leaving me to swing by myself. When I followed her in, in a few minutes, it was with the hollowed-out sense of having been broken, having seen oneness cut in half. There was the horror of it. The large, cavernous reception area led to several equally large, cavernous room spaces, empty, dark, and forbidding at this time of night, where I decided to spend a few minutes regrouping. Through an open door, I watched N make her usual party rounds. My date for the night was sequestered in one spot, and hadn't moved. I wanted to be somewhere else. Yet the demands of the evening required that I emerge and begin to do my own rounds. So, getting up my gets, I shut the door behind me (to all that wilderness) and walked straight over to the piano, where a bunch of random kids were huddled. The tunes I plonked out were simple ones, and I didn't sing along. I shyly approached my date and was evenly accepted. She had no heaviness for me the way N did, who would not speak to me for the rest of the night. But she liked her own body and the power it gave her. I myself should not, perhaps, have been a prisoner of the physical, but I was. I desired women physically in a way I could not hide. I wanted a shared oneness which was all-consuming. And my soul could only wish that there, under those stars, with light traffic rolling by on Old York Road, I could take N to the place where she might want what I wanted, and we could be all-consuming with each other, and nothing in us, physical or otherwise, could be anything but joined forever.

#49

The weekend nights we went ice skating at the Old York Road Ice Skating Rink, semi-adjacent to Elkins Park Square, also on Old York Road, weren't much for Ted and I: just something to do. Neither of us could ice skate that much. But there was a DJ playing good music over the PA, and taking requests, and a lot of Cheltenham kids hung out at the rink on weekends, so it was a chance to see and be seen. One uneventful ice skating night, I tumbled onto my ass as usual, and rose to see a girl, sitting in a clump of kids, on the bleachers, staring fixedly at me. My next pass, I got in a good look at her, and saw the spell was holding: she was still staring. She was a dirty blonde, thick-set build, with very full lips, a wide mouth, and wearing a dark green winter hat. I made up my mind: my next pass, I was going to stare as fixedly at her as she was at me. Ted was floating in the environs somewhere, and didn't know what was going on. So, here I came, looking at the girl in the green winter hat I'd never seen before, who seemed to want a piece of my action. I was close enough to make my presence known to her; we locked eyes; and what I saw in the delicate blue eyes was a sense of being startled, shocked into awareness somehow. Only, there was something so raw, so frank in them that I had to look away. My next, and final pass for the time being, the same thing happened. My eyes were startled, in an animal way, by how startled, how riveted her own eyes were, and I found myself unable to prolong contact. As Ted and I hung in the changing room, which had picnic tables and benches in it and doubled as a hang out space, I relayed to Ted, not without pride, what had happened. Ted was a reasonable, rather than a jealous type, but shy. So, the mysterious dirty blonde sat with her friends still, unmolested by us. Edward, our close acquaintance, a year older than us but kind, and conversant with almost everyone at the rink, was someone I could consult, so I did. I pointed her out, and he said, "Oh, that's Nicole. Do you know her?" "No, I was just curious. Thanks, Eddie." He chuckled, and left us alone, close acquaintanceship not guaranteeing me any more than that. I had wild hopes that Nicole would burst dramatically into the hang-out room with her friends, and perhaps propose marriage to me. When the gaggle of kids including Nicole, who had all been bleacher-hounding, left, they walked past us, down the steps and out. Nicole did not venture a final glance. For several months after that, I hoped Ted and I would see Nicole at the rink, but we did not. It was a lesson in the live-wire nature of desire, as it lives between people— how flames both begin to burn and are extinguished, out of nowhere, at the behest of forces no one really understands. Ted, that night, did his rounds, building a solid structure which would enable him to become a popular kid at CHS. I lit somebody on fire, but in such a way that all that could come from it was subsumed beneath implacable surfaces. Somewhere, I felt instinctively, was the key to the mystery I was looking for. Even if finding that key meant riding confusing, misleading, and/or agonizing waves.

#51

There was, as ever, no reason for me to be at camp anymore: it was all sports, ball-sweat, and male camaraderie. I had become an artist and needed to be nurtured. My cabin was full of jocks and I was victimized and it was a nadir in my life. Yet I was tough enough that they couldn't beat me up and so physical abuse never happened. I was forced to bear the awkwardness of having once been a jock, and then moved on. Everyone knew this, so their jibes, as though I were an established geek, tended to fall flat. I could still swing a baseball bat like a pro, and that was that. My only relief was a stage in a Recreation Hall on which I set up my gear and I would press the distortion button on my Peavey and empty myself completely. There were bats nested in the ceiling and a battered piano and it was the only congenial place on the camp grounds where my solitude was real. Looking at the nested bats, hanging up in a line, I felt a sense of kinship with a place left raw, not untouched by man but not too touched either. The Rec Hall was a dilapidated mess of sodden, splinter-granting wood, culminating in a slanted, tent-like roof like a country church. On a day to day basis, it was mostly unused, even as it was flanked, on either side, by a wood-shop and a metal-shop space. Tony, the counselor in charge of wood-shop, would sometimes peek through one of the open windows to comment on something I'd played. As a kid who only intermittently took lessons, I knew some ground-level music theory and no more. This, Tony spotted. Random kids came in to listen and it might as well have been an activity that could be signed up for like volleyball or kayaking. A kid willing to be that dogged and that alone was a sort of freak show. The kids got a taste of continuance (stinging phrases, me practicing finger vibrato, over and over) and I was shadow-bracketed, including to myself.

#53

We had gone, briefly, to Disney World. Dad's ferment was obvious, but he muzzled it. One night, we were about to go to Epcot Center and I had the TV on. I saw a picture of a downed plane and the name of one of my then-heroes. I thought, of course, that he had been killed, and I entered a strange zone. I was sucked up into what felt like a void: my senses, materially unaltered, felt spiritually different, as if I was disconnected from the jubilant scenes that passed before my eyes (babies, families, six foot smiling rodents). Epcot was spaced, from attraction to attraction, as though it could be hills, small inclines, or flat terrain at any moment. Crowds of people moved in random formations in all directions, while other crowds stood and stared at what was in the enclosure areas. I was sucked up, from the inside out, into a space of non-being, where I reflected back a sense of there-ness which I did not feel. From being in a foreign place, among this many foreign bodies, I felt my consciousness lifting upwards and plunging downwards at the same time. Epcot was about space, and space games, and I moved into line with a space I had never felt before, and could not identify. Though it later turned out that it wasn't my hero who died, the other world I had entered, a void world, impressed me with its force and negative vivacity. Negativity, where this realm was concerned, was not the same as emotional depression; it was alienation from the condition of bodily awareness, and a realization of fluidities amidst seeming solidities. It was a taste of real death, or life-in-death.

#64

Ted's birthday was in early May and he had a party. Ted's house on Woodlawn Avenue had a front façade of windows which ran the length of the house, which was not set on a hill but also had a large white shed attendant on the backyard. It was my fate, in a year's time, to smoke pot there for the first time. Woodlawn Avenue, as privatized as my stretch of Mill Road which was not far away (though Mill Road was only a memory then), did a rustic trick, inside and outside of Ted's house, of making everything crepuscular. A sunset realm. N was there, in shorts and a tee-shirt. Everyone was watching *Die Hard* but I put my left hand on N's bare right knee. It was very forward and she didn't resist. The spring twilight had enchanted us. The creek ran. Fate had decreed, in N's acceptance of my hand, that I would gain, finally, a girlfriend, and lose a father. The party would end but she was mine. I decided; I would never go back to Dad's apartment again. My Mom had been waiting patiently for me to see through his posturing; now, I did. I knew all this while everyone watched the movie and N smiled in her Scorpio way. That Sunday, Dad called to ask when I'd be coming home, but it was too late. The next time I entered Dad's apartment, it was to collect my stuff; he wasn't even there. I was ready to live on Old Farm Road with Mom, ready to be young again and to live however I wanted, without fear of random senseless typhoons blowing me over. The credits rolled; Ted shot me a look of clean dirtiness. This was the end of my beginning; in my beginning was no end.

Acknowledgements

P.F.S. Post— "31"

Stoning the Devil— "7"

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